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FM AMCONSUL JERUSALEM  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2842  
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/WHITE HOUSE NSC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JERUSALEM 001758

SIPDIS

NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE. NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/PASCUAL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/22/2017

TAGS: KWBG PGOV PREL PTER PHUM KPAL IS

SUBJECT: FRANCISCANS SAY ISRAEL BREACHING STATUS QUO  
ARRANGEMENTS

REF: JERUSALEM 01327

Classified By: Acting Principal Officer Greg Marchese, per reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. The Franciscan (Catholic) Custos of the Holy Land has formally complained to the GoI about breaches in the status quo regarding holy places, and his representative has requested that the USG press the GoI to protect Jerusalem's Christian holy sites. According to the Custos, an Orthodox yeshiva in the former Franciscan monastery at the Cenacle (or Room of the Last Supper) on Mount Zion is undertaking renovations that have removed Christian symbols, undermining the Franciscans' claim to the buildings. In addition, GoI Ministry of Tourism officials inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher have requested that monks and nuns display their tour guide licenses, contravening the GoI's commitment to respect the status quo with regard to holy sites. (Note: The Custos's letters can be found on the ConGen's classified website at [http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/jerusalem/ind\\_ex.cfm](http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/jerusalem/ind_ex.cfm) by clicking on the link for Political Reporting Attachments. Background information on the Cenacle at para 5. End note.)  
End Summary.

#### RENOVATIONS UNDERMINE CHRISTIAN NATURE OF THE CENACLE

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¶2. (C) Franciscan Custos of the Holy Land Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa registered a formal complaint with the GoI on August 25 against "destruction and demolition" of the Cenacle on Mount Zion. The complaint, which was copied to all Jerusalem Consuls General, stated that "private Orthodox Jewish elements" are altering the Cenacle and surrounding buildings through renovation and reconstruction. According to the letter, this alteration includes removing Christian symbols and reorganizing the structure to make it unrecognizable as a former monastery. Father Pizzaballa called for "an immediate stay and cessation of any and all work on the site" and the appointment of a jointly agreed upon committee to investigate the damage.

¶3. (C) Father Athanasius Macora, Head of the Christian Information Center and a representative of the Custos of the Holy Land, showed PolOff areas in the former monastery where carved stone crosses had been sanded off the walls and where renovations were altering the former monastery's layout. He said these actions undermine the Franciscans' claim to the building, which is currently controlled by the GoI and houses a yeshiva. He requested USG assistance to preserve the Cenacle complex.

#### OFFICIALS DEMAND TO SEE CLERGY GUIDING PERMITS IN THE HOLY SEPULCHER

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¶4. (C) Father Pizzaballa also formally complained to the GoI

Ministry of Tourism on August 21 against officials inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher demanding to see clergy members' tour guide permits. Father Athanasius told PolOff that the Franciscan Church licenses clergy in agreement with the Ministry, but GoI officials entered the church several times in August and asked monks and nuns guiding pilgrims to show their licenses. He said the GoI is breaching its commitment to respect the status quo with regard to holy places. GoI officials should not enter holy sites or disrupt pilgrimages to conduct investigations, he added. He said the Catholic Church maintains that "we have an inherent right to guide in Christian holy places," because Israeli-licensed guides cannot provide the spiritual experience that Christian pilgrims seek.

BACKGROUND ON THE CENACLE AND  
FRANCISCAN MONASTERY ON MOUNT ZION

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**¶15.** (U) The Cenacle is the purported site of the Last Supper. The building contains the Cenacle room, the Room of the Holy Spirit, and King David's cenotaph, and is part of a former Franciscan monastery. The site housed one of the earliest Christian churches in Jerusalem, and has been razed and rebuilt at least twice. The Franciscans acquired the property in 1342 and established a monastery, but were forced out by the Ottomans in 1552. The complex served as a mosque until the mid-twentieth century and contains Muslim symbols and a Muslim cemetery. The GoI took control of the property after 1967 and a yeshiva was established there in 1975. The Franciscans claim continuous ownership of the site since 1342, in spite of not having control of it since 1552.

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